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International Twinning
"The Relevance of Twinning in a Changing World"

When I was speaking to the Prime Minister of Guyana this morning, he gave me an idea with which to begin this speech — and that is, that there are two kinds of twins — biological ones, which are natural but not unusual, and sociological ones which are less unusual but, by definition, not natural. I think that in the relations between cities, it is the sociological twins rather than the biological ones that we are very concerned about.

For twins in biology have the problem of the similar identity. All the world sees them in fact as being pretty much two of the same thing. To the undiscerning eye, except for their mother and father, that is how they look. But in the case of the twinning of cities which is sociological and social, what men seek is not usually the sameness of appearance or character but a complementarity of interests and an exchange of experience arising out of significant differences.

And it seems to me if twinning is going to have a relevance in the changing world, especially the world of the latter part of the twentieth century, then it is seeking out those cities that are significantly different from ones own that really makes twinning the intelligent and creative exercise it ought to be. When cities twin with those that are different from them they are seeking not so much an extension of sameness as an experience of otherness. What they are in search of is a widening of their understanding rather than a repetition of their knowing. You see, just as in the case of individuals, so in the case of cities, part of our security lies in relating to those who are most like us. That kind of relationship confirms our perceptions of the world, strengthens our security and more or less makes us feel at home. But if people only do that and if cities only do that, then they are missing out another vast dimension of reality — which is this: we see ourselves best and understand ourselves most when we set ourselves next to those who are different from us.

Those who want to see the world only from their small corner of it extended to infinity will twin with cities exactly like themselves. But those who want to see the world in its complexity and larger reality will attempt to twin with cities which are fundamentally different in culture, in ethos, even in rhythm from their own. And as the world shrinks and becomes increasingly what people now call "the global village" where everybody is everybody else's "next door neighbour", then it is far more important to twin with those who are basically unlike you but who have a similar commitment to the security of our global environment than to twin with those who are like you, burying your heads in each other's sand.

The reasons for this are, I think, very fundamental and very important to people who think of twinning and practice it. And I want to start with the problem of communication. Now to most people, communication is not a problem because every night you can sit down before the "tele" and look at it and literally see the world happening in front of you. The great speed of modern communications, faster than the twinkling of an eye and quicker than it takes an ordinary noise to reach an ordinary ear in an ordinary distance, makes people live under the illusion that they are understanding a great deal about people who are different from themselves — because they happen to see what they are doing in front of their eyes. But the truth of the matter is that the speed of modern communications is beginning to have the opposite effect. For when people become accustomed to watching events as they happen, disasters, tragedies, elations, victories — whatever category of human experience you wish — they tend to assume that they really understand because they visualise, or rather because things are visualised for them. And slowly they develop a numbness to catastrophe, a numbness to difference, a numbness to even exultation and ecstasy — to all the things that make other people suffer, and laugh and dance and build because they see too much of them at the same time.

I was talking the other day to a group of communicators and I asked them what was their most pervasive problem, what was their most fundamental agony. They said that communications had reached the stage where folk would no longer readily respond to it because so many messages are beamed to all of the people all of the time that they were developing not just a detachment from, but an immunity to, the news, the views and the scenarios on the screen. And then one of the most perceptive of these gentlemen and ladies qualified this statement. They do not yet develop an immunity to advertisements but they develop an immunity to disasters. Somebody has coined the phrase "the pornography of poverty" and it came out of a situation where people observing naked children with bloated stomachs in various hungry parts of the world appearing on television night after night, found that they lost sympathy with the victims of deprivation from the constant exposure. The observers were saying "let them die, let them obey the old Malthusian law by which disaster kills out the "unnecessary" hungry and leaves space on the earth for the "necessary" full.

The communicators were telling me that this was the problem of their success: that they had brought so many things so close to so many people that most of these things had no impact any more. It seems to me that if this is one of the fundamental problems of modern communications than twinning is a way, even a limited and humble way, of circumventing that problem and increasing our sensitivity as we

increase our proximity to the inhabitants of other cities. Let me put it this way: a person who can sit at a television and watch disaster occur in parts of Latin America, in parts of South East Asia may say to himself, and often does, there but for the grace of modern technology go I. But when you have actually travelled to an area in an exercise of twinning, and (as you like to say in North America) have encountered others eye-ball to eye-ball, touch to touch, then you would hardly develop an immunity to the things that afflict them. Those who have been to another city in twinning develop personal interconnections that transcend the differences of wealth or situations. The result is that if disaster strikes that city — be it a hurricane, an earthquake, a flood or a drought — twinning immediately feel a personal response: they rise up to help rather than sit down to sigh.

The great vitality and validity, therefore, of twinning is that it personalises relations, not just between cities in their corporate capacity, but between people in their personal capacity and makes you realise as John Donne said in 1603: "no man is an island unto himself". And if John Donne had been alive today he would have changed the phrasing of that particular thought and would have said: "no people is a continent unto itself, we are all parts of one great continent, consequently what diminishes some part of mankind diminishes me." I think that is really the text of twinning. The point that Donne made then, when there was no radio, television or aeroplane, no telstar, is an even more pressing and puissant point now: that any diminution of people by suffering, by disaster, by death, by cataclysm, diminishes each one of us wherever we are. For whenever flesh and blood suffer we are involved and we, too, are consumed.

The important thing about twinning in this last quarter of the twentieth century is not just the fact that two cities of different culture, different location, different political ethos get together, it is more the fact that the people of those cities get to know each other. And perhaps one of the most helpful features of the special relationship between Georgetown and Ottawa is that the idea of twinning went beyond having the citizens of Georgetown come to Ottawa and stay at hotels or vice-versa. In our case the twinning was an acceptance of people right in the bosom of the family. When Ottawans went down to Georgetown they stayed with Guyanese families and were therefore able to observe at very close quarters both the patterns and the rhythms of the life of the Guyanese with whom they stayed. And when the Guyanese come to Ottawa they stay with Ottawa families — entering into the spirit and substance of household procedures. Consequently, they are able to observe how a group of Canadians in the Federal capital live and react to the stuff of reality in their daily lives.

Now that to me is a fundamental of twinning. For officials always meet. Functionaries travel all over the world — they are bound to in this day of modern jet communication. The mayor of any city can meet the mayor of any other city. They just have to go to a convention, a symposium or exchange visits. But the thing about twinning that gives it special power is not the thin film of officialdom at the top, people who are inevitable at any meeting point anywhere in the world; it is the people lower down, people in the middle groups and even lower than that who meet and cross-pollinate without necessarily having to take official attitudes and strike official postures.

When mayor or aldermen commune, they will necessarily employ the restricted language that their political and diplomatic situations dictate. They will not hazard speculative opinions — that is not the nature of their function. They will not necessarily give *obita dicta* because that is not expected of their trade. They will, in fact, say the cautious and correct things. But when a local GP from Ottawa meets a local GP from Georgetown they don't have the several collateral constraints of the officials. They can talk to each other as two GPs operating out of different situations in pursuit of the same objective which is the preservation of health. And so they can talk at liberty and at large rather than by protocol and precedent. What they develop out of living in each other's houses is not merely a scientific approach to a shared medical problem, but they see a relationship between that scientific approach and the pattern of the daily lives of the people whom the problem affects.

The Committee of Ottawa was responsible two years ago for sending the Glebe Collegiate Band to Georgetown. I shall never forget the comment that one of those tuneful young people made to a member of the Twinning Committee. She said: "You know, I had never really watched at close quarters an Indian family". (Indian here does not mean North American Indian but one whose ancestors came from India). "I was put to stay with an Indian family. I had nearly always had the impression that Indians were a deeply materialistic people who veneered their materialism with a film of religion. I observed the family getting up at five o'clock every morning — they were Hindus — to pray. And I observed some members of the family fasting, and I noticed a sense of community that came out of their prayers and their fasting. I came back to Ottawa with a very different impression of what the descendants of people from India are like. I can no longer say that they are either materialistic or spiritualistic. I don't know what to say". Now that is a healthy agnosticism. It is the sort of thing which emerges out of twinning.

And this brings me to the second reason for thinking that twinning is a useful exercise if it is properly conducted. And that is for the waning and, hopefully, the demise of stereotyping. Let me take a Canadian example. In this vast land of Canada, each Canadian ethnic group has a stereotype of other Canadian ethnic groups. Two nights ago I was in the company where I said to somebody: "What is your impression of a French Canadian?" "Someone who waves his hands about when he is speaking, opens his eyes to the largest possible capacity, if necessary pulls you by the tie to make his point and has an amoral approach to politics and remembers too much history". Fortunately there was in the room other types of Canadians. So I called over a Québécois — separately, of course — and I said to her: "Tell me, friend, what is your impression of the Anglophone", and she replied, "arrogant, chauvinistic, frosty, insensitive to other people's cultural needs." And I said: "What do you mean by frosty?" She said: "When an Anglophone speaks to you he has to establish a sizeable territory. He has to stand off from you and project his words out like intercontinental missiles. He puts his hands in his pockets and nearly every sentence comes out like a papal encyclical especially when he is talking to us." And I said: "Do you know what he said about you?" She said: "I can guess". And within a few sentences she was absolutely correct. In every multi-racial or multi-cultural society people form stereotypes of what other people are supposed to be like on this basis of these stereotypes they often make political and social judgements. But stereotyping is the most dangerous if even it seems the most comforting of approaches to others. You must have heard it said that there are some nations that are fundamentally lazy; that is why there are so many underdeveloped countries in the world; that there are other nations that are fundamentally industrious and they are the ones whose rainbows have the pots of gold.

You must have heard it said that some people in the Developing World have a mystical approach to existence — they dream this life away thinking about the next life — that is why they never bother making money in this one. And equally you hear those same people who are supposed to be dreaming about the next life are quick to grasp for the nearest material things they can get. In both cases stereotypes and contradictory ones at that.

I have had Europeans tell me that Canadians — Anglophone Canadians — are quiet Americans with a sentimental attachment to royalty. And I know after being here for nearly five years that every generalisation and every stereotype that you can make about Canadians is fundamentally and palpably wrong, for I have never met anything called a standard Canadian. There are so many kinds of Canadians that if there is a statutory Canadian everybody will be the exception. Now, if stereotypes are so attractively misleading, one of the best ways to discover how misleading they are is to go out in a twinning exercise to another place. First you will find that you travel with your own conceptions of what the other people are really like and it is when you arrive and stay in their houses and stay in their cities that you discover that so much goes into the structure of a human personality rendering simple descriptions true of nobody. There are no such things as national characteristics to which there are not numerous and obligatory exceptions.

If twinning does this alone — to make us humble in the face of the complexity of others as we are humble in the face of our own — it is the beginning of a break-through in international understanding. For, to get back to my first point, when you watch television, you often watch the visual simplification of issues. When you hear the commentators talking, since they only have three or four minutes, they tend to take complexity out of what they say. But when you go to a country and you stay with families, see them in what the theologians call their "totality of existence" you come away less certain, more healthfully agnostic about how those people are made up and what makes them tick — that is the beginning of wisdom. And we need a terrific amount of wisdom in today's international relations if we are going to survive in peace.

My next consideration is that if twinning is going to be a really productive enterprise then it should involve a relationship with people who are not only different from you in culture but also different from you in condition. That means that considerable thought should be given to establishing relationships with cities in the Developing World. For there are a great many myths about the Developing World which have to be cleared away if the people of the North are going to look seriously at the problem of poverty in the South.

The common view about Developing countries is that they need aid, and they need it more abundantly. Another common assumption is that Northern countries give as much as they can afford. Using this assumption as a basis of complaint many in the rich countries say of the poor ones: "We have given them a lot of aid and they still have not developed. What is the matter?" A popular answer to that question is that there is a congenital inability to grow. But when you get out to a developing country you often find that the people have as much pride as anybody else. What they want is not handouts, they want better terms of trade. They want a more equitable system for the international flow of goods, so that what

stimulates you will also stimulate them: the knowledge that there is a return coming, one part of which can be plowed back into the industry, the other part of which can be plowed into the nation.

There is a certain country in a certain continent which, in 1973, was so persuaded by its President to produce two and a half times the normal crop that the whole nation seemed to have turned itself into a disciplined instrument of production. That very year the crop they sold on the international market fell by one half of its original price and they got less therefore for the crop, having produced a bumper one with all the moral and physical muscle they could conjure up, than they got the year before when they produced a significantly smaller one. That is what is called disincentive, that is defeat. When people live under those conditions in the present international economic order that pervades over the world, it is not laziness, it is sometimes despair that makes them stop and say — well, what on earth is the use of producing a crop like this when other people elsewhere have the facility and the power — and exercise both of them — to reduce the price of our crops. If you are twinned with cities in the developing world you will see at first hand a great deal of this problem. You will see, too, men and women thinking long thoughts and working long hours to arrest the deprivation which is imposed upon them by a lopsided international environment.

Let me give you an example of the kind of ingenuity often unsuspected but certainly present in the Developing World. In a large country of South East Asia where villages and villagers abound, there is an area in which all the forests had been cut down to make fuel for the villagers' fires. With the wood went also the soil since the cutting down of the one nearly always means the erosion of the other. Just as despair was beginning to sap the vitality of the villagers a very imaginative doctor, native of that country, trained here in Canada, arrived on the scene, hit on an idea that at first sight appeared both to the villagers and the more sophisticated authorities as ludicrous but which was simple in its conception and remarkably effective in its operation.

The doctor, with a gift for persuasion commonly associated with senior Statesmen, got all the villagers to urinate into special tanks. Those tanks were then sealed off so as to become airtight and the urine decomposed into gas which was piped into the kitchen of each villager supplying his stove with the energy necessary for cooking. That sort of ingenuity is just one of many examples I can quote whereby skilled people with a commitment to their society attempt to naturalise the effects of the stultifying situations in which they are forced to live dictated by an unequable economic order.

One of the first things you will realise when you visit a twin city in the Developing World is how much ingenuity and effort go into sustaining the normal processes of life; and how much these societies are kept afloat, not by aid though it may come, not by the visits of the experts though they will always come, but by the dedicated imagination of trained natives and the cooperation of the little people to whom they render their services.

Twinning gives you an opportunity to see these things for yourself for only very seldom that you actually see them on television. Such success, painful to come by, emerging by gradual stages, does not create a sort of news flash with which the media feels itself best equipped to deal. Disaster certainly; eroticism definitely; scandal inevitably. This, we are told, is what people want to hear — what switches them on. Success, particularly when it is not on a dramatic scale and cannot easily be sensationalised does not, so the popular assumption has it, make good copy.

I think this whole attitude is summed up in the apocryphal story about the Director of the Metropolitan Ballet and his prima donna. This particular Director noticed with mounting chagrin week after week that the prima donna nearly always appeared, whatever the particular glory of her performance, on page 21 of the New York Times. So one night, rendered at once bold and rubicund by many a martini, he approached the editor of the celebrated newspaper and said: "What do I have to do to persuade you to put my prima donna on the front page?" The editor, with a look of avuncular wisdom, replied: "Shoot her and you will have her on the front page tomorrow". In short, many people conclude that a quick dismissal of a historical process, an eruption either volcanic or popular, a Watergate or any similar sort of "Gate" involving great public figures — those are the substance of things men look for, the evidence of what they wish to see. If the media will not bring before your eyes or to your ears what you need to know about a large part of the world you inhabit then twinning can; and what will appear before your eyes is not what is beamed from many miles away. In short, you will have become both your own international reporter and your own audience.

But here I would like to strike a cautionary note. Twinning is at its most effective and creative not when those vast conglomerations of urban complexity — called megapolises — enter into relationship but rather when middle-sized and small-sized cities do. If you twin a city like London with a city like Calcutta, you are likely to twin surfaces not depths. The Mayors of those two big entities accompanied by the statutory cohorts of officials, advisers and press men will meet in the ultimacy of protocol. Elegant,

balanced, but not necessarily epoch-making speeches will be made on either side, elbows will be bent and cleverly termed compliments exchanged. The advisers will talk to the advisers and the experts to the experts. And there will be a general mood of high structured euphoria. Fine. Except that it all remains like the love of life of elephants: where everything is done at the highest level accompanied by great trumpeting and may be there will be nothing to show for it for a long, long time.

But if medium-sized cities twin, people actually meet people; teachers with teachers, doctors with doctors, trade unionists with trade unionists and so on down the line. And if they meet as families or within families then you have the finest framework for an essentially human exchange of experience where the technical merely becomes part of the cultural and sociological then insights are gained and exchanged even when the participants are not looking for them.

During one of the twinning exchanges between Ottawa and Georgetown, a doctor from Ottawa stayed with a doctor from Georgetown. And in the course of a casual conversation the former mentioned that he had come up against a condition amongst some of his patients from the Developing World which was occasioning him considerable difficulties in diagnosis. As he described the symptoms, the Georgetown doctor suddenly said: "You got cases of sickle cell anemia". The Canadian doctor was intrigued and asked the Guyanese to develop his description of the malady and possibly go into its history. The Guyanese doctor pointed out that wherever there was a prevalence of malaria there tended to be a wide incidence of sickle cell anemia; for it was nature's way of producing a counter-offensive to malaria long before the introduction of quinine and other forms of modern medicine. Although malaria had been controlled, if not eliminated, in many parts of the tropical world, this counter-offensive continued to affect large numbers of people from the tropics even to second and third generations of those who migrated to the northern climes. The conversation went on from there as to the method of treating it. The Canadian doctor came back a much wiser man from having been on a twinning expedition to Georgetown.

What is significant about this particular example is its unstructured form — it came not out of the reading of a formal paper and the critical analysis which followed that, but out of a conversation between two general practitioners over breakfast. I think it was the great American theologian, Harvey Cox, who once wrote "civility in its valuable archaic sense is a virtue that combines two dimensions of life that our age to its detriment has surrendered — authentic intimacy and political maturity." That is a fine text for twinning for those two dimensions of life are best secured by this exercise. In the first place twinning allows for the intimacy of contact which tourism, by its very nature, negates. That vast enterprise of temporary human migration does very little for international understanding. All of you must have gone touring and must have realised that the great feature of tourism is the insulation of the tourist from the environment to which he has travelled by the process of supplying him with hotels which are like those at home; cuisine to which he is daily accustomed and exposure to people who happen to be his next door neighbours. One lies on beautiful golden beaches. One drinks that great imperial concoction, rum and coca cola. One observes selected samples of the local inhabitants suitably hatted and attired to give an illusion of uncerebral bliss, of limbs in constant rhythm, of lips in unchanging smiles, of a paradise of charming people stretching endlessly into the sunset. And so few tourists acquire any sense of the reality behind this facade of the deep problems within these societies of golden strands, and they return to their city with the conclusion that development may not be good for these folk since it is likely to spoil their ambrosian disposition. As one wit has observed, the tourist sees less of less and more of more till one of these days he is going to see nothing of everything.

Twinning avoids the mirage and can still enjoy the reality. It combines some of the attractions of tourism — sight-seeing, picnics in a possibly salubrious climate, the introduction to the spirit of monumental buildings, and, of course, a good sun-downer. But where the tourist seldom gets into the house of the local inhabitants, the twinner by definition does. Where the tourist is led around a famous cathedral by a guide less knowledgeable than anecdotal, less accurate than plausible, the twinner will be taken around the same cathedral by someone who worships there and feels a sense of ownership towards it, thus emphasizing both the reverence it inspires and the architectural admiration that it evokes. In short, authentic intimacy with the building's atmosphere will be an offshoot of the authentic intimacy with the people to use it and instead of colorful slides to indicate that one has been there, there will be a sensitivity to its symbolism.

There is no question that in the twinning exercise there is as much play as there is work. But I use play here in the sense which recently theologians and philosophers have been using it. That is to say the imaginative use of pleasure contributing to a penetrating awareness of culture. When you live for a while with a family in a twin city you do not only attend receptions and dances you also attend whatever cultural presentations are being made during your time there. There is no better way to start appreciating

the culture of others than by attending the plays they put on, the stage dances they mount, the poetry readings that they arrange, their religious rites especially what the sociologists call the right of passage, marriages, coming of age rituals, baptisms or other forms of initiating children into the society — and even funerals.

An Ottawan visiting Georgetown will learn a great deal about the inter-personal and inter-ethnic relations of Guyana which are conducted by attending a Guyanese wedding where the bride and groom are of African, or Indian, or Portuguese or Amerindian ancestry or better where the bride belongs to one ethnic group and one religious tradition and the bride groom belongs to another. In North America the dead are buried almost in an aura of privacy and only very close friends attend the last rites. But in many parts of the world, including my own, a funeral is a communal event where even those who knew the dead minimally or perhaps not at all, turn out to participate in the obsequies thereby showing that death is considered a public event and a sense of solidarity with the bereaved is almost trade-union like in intensity.

If you go as the classic tourist you might witness a phenomenon but never grasp at the meaning. If you go as a twinner you will have the opportunity both to participate in the phenomenon and to discuss the meaning and some who have done this have found that there are aspects of other cultures which they would like to make their own. Perhaps if I may change a well-known epigram, assimilation is the finest form of respect.

Finally, twinning can serve to create a constituency in both cities for the better appreciation of the problems of the respective countries. Many a politician in the Developed World has said that he would like to take steps to render more equable the international economic order thereby improving the living and working conditions in Developing countries. But his constituency does not go along with him in this desire. Twinning is a way of creating the right minded constituency though professional contacts which are also personal and conceptual contacts that are human as well.

In my experience those in the Developed world who have twinned with cities in the Developing ones are the first to explain to their compatriots why the gulf is widening between the rich and the poor ones. And their explanation has nothing to do with the perjorative notions I alluded to earlier in this talk but arises from a sensitive appreciation of the disadvantages and lack of opportunities which the international system imposes upon the poor countries. It is twidders who often write to their Parliamentarians and support them with their proposed motions for fair terms of trade between rich and poor countries.